

BABY *bookworms*

Alison Davies explores the myriad benefits of reading to your youngest children, and explains how to go about creating the perfect environment in which to do so...

It's never too early to start reading to children. Babies may not understand the words in a book, or be able to focus on the pictures, but they'll still reap countless benefits from the experience. Being read to is comforting, helping them bond with their carers and providing a sense of security. They understand that they are safe, and enjoy being held and nurtured. They will recognise the voice of the reader and begin to connect with it. They will get used to hearing certain words, and how they sound, and through this they will get a sense of meaning. As they get older, they'll be able to match this with the pictures, and come to a greater understanding of the words used. Babies who regularly experience books will grow to love story time. It will become a habit, an everyday ritual, and their literacy will improve immensely as a result.

What type of books?

Picture books are always first choice for reading sessions with babies because of their colour and subject matter, but in those early stages it really doesn't matter what the book's about. The important thing is that you have a book in your hands and you're reading a story. How you read it is key. Think about the rise and fall of your voice and the tempo at which you're reading. Make a point of turning the pages together, illustrating what a book is for and how it is used.

Books that include rhyming phrases are a popular choice, because babies respond to the lilting rhythm. Also look for books that include interesting sounding words that you can repeat and create your own rhymes with. Cloth covered books and those with pull out features add extra interest and give babies the opportunity to explore with their hands. Allowing little ones the time to touch and feel whilst reading stories adds an extra dimension to the tale, whilst helping with movement and balance.

for babies and small children; anything too soft might indicate bedtime. Stick with moderate lighting, but make sure that they're able to focus on the pictures in the book.

If it's a one-to-one reading session, make sure you're sat in a comfortable chair, or on cushions and mats. If it's a group session, designate a special area for reading and fill it with comfy cushions, rugs and blankets. Sitting in a semi circle is conducive to storytelling, and it means that you can position yourself so that everyone can see you and also the book. If you're working with very young children, get down to their level and let them touch and feel the pages.

It's important to introduce patterns and regularity into reading sessions. So try to make them the same time every day, and also for the same length of time. Keep to a structure, and repeat habits, like turning the page together every time you read a book. Babies and young children respond to routine. This is how they develop good habits, and begin to understand the value of reading.

Setting the scene

Think about the atmosphere you're trying to create for reading sessions. You want babies to feel safe, secure, and comfortable, so it makes sense that you also feel comfortable and relaxed. You also want to engage them in the story, so make sure they can see both your face and the book. Keep lighting neutral. Anything too bright will detract from the book and be uncomfortable

Reading buddies

Children's experiences can be enhanced by introducing a 'reading buddy', for example, a favourite cuddly toy, that comes out whenever you have your reading sessions. The idea is that babies get used to the reading buddy and associate it with story time, and you can use it as a creative tool to enhance reading sessions as they grow. Here's how:

■ Start each session by saying hello to the reading buddy; give it a name and let a baby touch and play with it. Eventually, babies will recognise the significance of the reading buddy, and they'll know that when it appears, it's time to get ready for a story.

■ Involve the reading buddy in the story by getting him to turn the page and point out interesting pictures and words. This kind of learning tool can be used to help little





about the author

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ones learn vocabulary. The reading buddy points to key words, which you then repeat together.

■ As you progress, use the reading buddy to help explain situations and introduce new experiences. Because the babies will be used to the toy being part of their reading sessions, they'll connect with it in any story setting, so you can put it in different situations and build a story around it. This might sound complicated, but it's easy if you stick to simple scenarios which explain every day events, like, "One day Ted had a sore tummy and he had to go to the doctors". Then explain that the doctor made Ted's tummy better with his magic potion, and Ted was able to go out to play with all his friends again.

Storytelling in groups

Group storytelling and reading sessions are important because they give babies the opportunity to develop both pre-reading and social skills. Mixing and learning with other children gives them a sense of community.

■ Choose your story carefully. If you're working with a group of babies and toddlers then go for nursery rhymes or animal stories.

Pick tales that can be made interactive, and include lots of noise and repetition to hold their attention. When babies are engaged they begin to make their own noises and movements, as they attempt to join in.

■ Practice the five-minute rule. Even the most experienced storyteller will struggle to hold the attention of a group of babies, so go for short snappy tales and keep things moving.

■ Use props. Soft toys, puppets and pictures will help to illustrate what's happening in the book and add interest.

■ Repetition is key. If you think the group is losing interest, introduce a sound, phrase or action that they can join in with. The secret to holding their attention is to give them plenty to take in, so work on all levels using sound, movement and expression.

■ Be flexible. Babies will show their appreciation by the noises that they make. If they appear to be enjoying a particular section of the book, repeat it. Don't worry about sticking to a rigid narrative structure. Take into account their response, and enhance that particular section with added actions, sounds and music.

USING THE SENSES

TO ENHANCE YOUR READING SESSIONS, THINK ABOUT INCORPORATING THE FIVE SENSES INTO STORYTELLING...

■ It's easy to make your reading area tactile by introducing soft furnishings, but think about the colours you use too. Stick to bright, light shades, and keep away from dark or fiery shades which might intimidate or over stimulate babies and young children.

■ Think about how the room smells. If possible burn a soothing essential oil like lavender or geranium. A comforting aroma helps little ones relax.

■ To introduce story time, you might want to play some music. Choose something bright and airy, with a gentle rhythm, and play it before every session. Young children will learn to identify the music, and will understand that it means it's time to settle down and read. You can also introduce a quiet noise, like a ringing bell, or clap your hands together to signify that it's time for the story to begin.



Babies will get a **sense** of the story from the **sound** of your voice, and the **inflections** that you introduce; it's this balance of tone and **expression** that will help them **develop** their vocabulary

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